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ABSTRACT

To help new students clarify goals, understand the demands of college, and successfully adjust to college life, Queensborough Community College (QCC), in Bayside, New York, developed the "Introduction to College" program. The program combines a 4-week orientation seminar with a writing-accross-the-curriculum approach to help QCC's diverse student population make the transition to college life, while maintaining the value of their diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The four sessions of the seminar focus on the realization that students' college careers will include challenging intellectual, vocational, emotional, physical, and social growth experiences and seek to impart a sense of the importance of the various facets of the college experience. The writing component functions as an avenue toward self-insight. At the end of each class session, instructors provide students with open-ended questions (e.g., "Who am I?") and encourage them to search for answers through writing in journals. These journal entries provide instructors, who also function as counselors, with insights into the diverse backgrounds and needs of students. A retention study conducted of fall 1980 freshmen indicated a positive correlation between freshmen enrollment in the seminar and reenrollment in the spring 1981 semester. (Includes samples of student journal entries). (ECC)

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# JOINING FRESHMAN ORIENTATION CONCEPTS

# WITH WRITING-ACROSS-THE-CURRICULUM

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Out of our need to understand the educational ramifications of the many diversities of gender, race and ethnicity found among the students of our community college campuses, two important and related educational concepts have developed. These are 1) an extension of freshman orientation into a weekly developmenmtal seminar and 2) writing-across-the-curriculum. Both concepts are meant to help students deal with problems around learning, college success, and skills growth and may be combined in micro-theme writing.

Our commuting college population reflects the heterogeneity of the City of New York, and for success our students need to understand the college and the larger society while we remain aware of the richness of diverse cultures. Such awareness should be reflected in freshman orientation programs which help us to better communicate

JC 910 034

with our students.

Since career development is part of our freshman orientation, and since writing is an essential skill in all careers, and the more widely it is used, the more the student develops that skill.

Just what are the changes in freshman-orientation concepts which we mentioned earlier, and why are they specifically taking place on the community college campus? "The Chronicle of Higher Education,"(1) October 1981, states that "the biggest changes in orientation are occurring among community colleges, which traditionally devoted a few hours to a campus tour and registration, but not much more.... Today they are spending time 'talking through' some of the anxieties.... the change is more and more awareness that orientation at the community college is a very, very important step in the student's life."

Many incoming freshmen, we now know, are undecided about their future, their major field of study, plans for the future and ambitions. Entering students often only poorly understand their college years as a time of self-discovery and intellectual growth. Their personal uncertainties are further compounded by such factors as

fear, gender role confusion and language barriers. Differences between themselves and others - such as disparate values, attitudes and cultural traits, economic disparities and racial inequities - add to the confusion. Thus, a cycle is often created in which the entering commuting college student is really entering a revolving door of registration, confusion and eventual withdrawal from the school.

It is in our hands to correct this situation. If we are to extend the benefits of our democracy to the widely divergent population that is our college student body, new approaches are in order. It is not enough to recruit students, we must work to retain them because that is the true meaning of equal opportunity.

A four week seminar is an attempt to help students understand this juncture of entry into college as a turning point in their lives and to realize that their college careers will include challenging intellectual, vocational, emotional, physical and social growth experiences. This is a tall order for a four-session course, and would more appropriately lend itself to a full semester's work, since there is evidence that such courses do have a positive impact on student retention.

A Retention Study of Fall 1980 day freshmen by the

Dean of Students at Queensborough looks at the relationship between retention and enrollment in the Introduction to College seminars. Eighty-five percent of registered 1980 freshmen who enrolled in the seminar registered for the Spring 1981 semester. The data reported in this study is correlational and we do not infer a causal relationship. However, the positively correlated data between academic progress and retention in the college lends itself to some tentative interpretation. It would suggest that participation in an on-going orientation program contributes to a successful college experience and promotes student retention for the college.

Although "Writing-Across-The-Curriculum" is a fast growing concept, Knoblauch and Brannon (3) recommend a broader use of the concept: " ... one that finds justification for writing, not in a concern for displaying commonplace ideas in prefabricated form, but instead in the potential for new learning implicit in the act of writing itself."

Since writing, we reasoned further, is used to acquire knowledge in specific disciplines, i.e., the history teacher uses it to assist the student in learning history, could it not be used for the acquisition of self-knowledge? Writing, then, would not be just an amassing of facts but rather an effective introspective

tool to use in the student's self-developmental process. The use of journal writing has always been a tool for self-examination and may be combined in any Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program.

In discussing the use of journals in writing, Fulwiler[2] suggests that they are excellent places to "try, experiment, test one's wings... Personal journals, "and he adds "can be a documentary of both academic and personal growth, a record of evolving insight." The journal also is a place for self-discovery and for the clarification of one's own values.

Rennert[4] suggests further that when "confronted with significant questions and problems, students moved away from stereotypes and were stimulated to discover, through writing, knowledge about their values and attitudes."

Each class session then ends with a written exercise; the instructor asking an open-ended question, encouraging the students to search for answers through writing in their journals.

The question at the end of the first session of the seminar is "Who Am I?" which always elicits a varied and enlightening range of responses. This introductory piece of student writing is a way for the teacher to get to know

each student and is particularly important because of the student population as a whole. The seminar is structured in such a way that the instructor a student has for this course will remain his/her counselor throughout his/her college career. We can observe an introduction to the developmental process through one or two excerpts from students' journal pieces. Some examples of writing follow.

"I'm a separated mother of a four year old boy, working 30 hours a week. This year I finally decided to go back to school. I know it will not be easy, but now I'm willing to give it my best. My goal is to finish my nursing classes and become a good nurse. When I went to high school, I had to go, but now I want to go to college."

"I am a 32-year old female. I came to college because I would like to pursue a career in the business world. I have previous experience working for banks and different companies. I graduated from a two-year business school in July 1986. Most of my teachers advised me to go back to college since I have the potential. I find economics class very difficult but that doesn't discourage me from reaching my goal, which is to graduate from college."

"I am someone who is very confused about almost

everything in my life right now. I am not sure what I want to do with myself, but I know I want to be something/someone. I have a great family and friends who have made me become a good person and friend. I am now just trying to understand myself and what I am feeling. I am someone who doesn't know "Who Am I?"

"I am a graduate from an aviation high school. My curriculum at Queensborough is Electrical Technology. I used to work at an ice cream parlor but I quit because I was being cheated with my money. I am a native of New York and my parents are both Colombian. I am taking 15 credits this semester during an 18 hour week. My hobbies are bike riding, watching TV, listening to music, traveling and collecting comics."

"I am a freshman student at Queensborough Community College. I hope to achieve all my credits and then move on to another college and continue my education in Design Drafting. I believe I am a smarter person than my high school grades show, and so I am taking college seriously."

"I am a college freshman at Queensborough, and I go to work approximately 30 hours per week. So far I think college is alright. The remedial classes are too easy. The reason I had to take remedial class is because I had to go to work on the day I took the placement test and I

really didn't do my best. I am from a foreign country which I dislike and I haven't been back since the 16 years of my being here. I am working toward becoming a Christian."

Although the above excerpts represent only a very small sample of the student writings produced in the course, they do shed light on the diverse backgrounds, concerns and legitimate realistic demands. The important thing is that regardless of their grammar and syntax - correct or less so - most students in these essays express themselves freely and openly. They describe the common denominators of excessive work loads, parenting while they are in school, romantic concerns and almost universally, a desire to succeed in school. Our challenge is to encourage and foster success in these students, since that desire to succeed is already there. From the writings we often learn other fruitful areas for further exploration in the seminar.

This idea is utilized in sessions on career choice, School problems, anxieties, fears, etc.

"Who is the most important person in my life? Why? The most important person in my life is my mother. I never realized it before, but she does play a big role in my life. She has helped me through many difficult times

and has guided me in the right direction all my life. I never really thought about her influence on me. I always thought she was a nag when she gave me advice but now that I am old enough I understand and appreciate her."

"My boyfriend, Joe, is one person who is very important to me. I am not writing this because he's my boyfriend; I am writing this cause he's also my friend. He taught me how to be able to be on my own, how to speak up for myself and defend myself. I used to depend on him until I saw how independent he was. Another reason why he is so important to me is because I know that he is one of the very few people I can trust. I feel comfortable talking about almost anything to him, except of course other guys but that's what my friends are for."

"Someone who helped me in life is my girlfriend, Annemarie. She helped me because before I knew her my mind was all screwed up and I really didn't know right from wrong. She helped me to look at things better and to be able to stand on my own two feet alone. I am not a reject or anything by saying this but all I am saying is that she helped me to look at situations in life better."

"My grandmother is a very important person to me. She is someone who is always there for me when no one else is. She is also there for me to talk to when I have a problem

or just need a shoulder to lean on. She understands me more than my mother does so she sympathizes with me. She's a lot of fun to be around, and she makes me laugh all the time. In a lot of ways she spoils me, she cooks all my meals, does my laundry and lots of other things I don't ask her to do. She just does them. She encourages me to do well and succeed in life because she wants the best for her only grandchild and without her I don't know what I'll do."

"The most important person in my life is my fiance. We have been together for the past three years. He has helped me in so many ways. In my family, in school, at work, just my life in general. He's a wonderful man and I love him for it. He was always there for me and still is. He talked me into going to college. I never had a good relationship with my parents and he changed that too. He made me open my eyes to the real world instead of living in a dream world. He made me appreciate life a lot more, and he made me appreciate people. Before him I didn't have many friends. He helped me overcome my shyness and my hostilities. He is the most important person in my life."

"The most important person in my life is my father. He's always been there when I needed him. Whenever I'm sick he takes me to the doctor or he makes me a tea.

Whenever I need money to go out he always gives me. Sometimes there are places I must go to and he lends me the car so I can go or sometimes he takes me so I won't have to take the train or bus. Throughout my education he paid my tuition. He has spent a lot of money on me and he's also paying my college expenses. Since I only work part-time now, I usually need some extra money and he gives me without any argument."

Though, as can be noted, the grammar, syntax and spelling of the students' writing in the "Introduction to College" course are often incorrect, the instructor's concern is not to focus on that aspect of their writing. Rather, as I have demonstrated, there is a sound basis for using this technique - writing as conceived by the WRIT program - as part of each student's developmental process in college and as a means for the faculty to gain understanding about each student.

All this is part of the realization that college freshmen need "basic training" in the standard process of assimilation into the new and unique culture that is the college experience - in spite of their many differences. Each student needs an adult contact on campus who cares about him or her and can assist him in developing a commitment to remain, and succeed in college. This should be the top priority of the institution, and this is the

role of the teacher cum counselor in the introductory course.

The focus of the "Introduction to College" course, then, is on the students' understanding themselves and realizing how that understanding affects their college lives. Through the course, the college aims to approach a group of diverse strangers who come from a wide range of backgrounds, and hopefully help them blend together, while maintaining their uniquenesses, within the campus, while gaining the benefits of learning.

The task of our "Introduction to College" is to help these students - where younger or older - clarify their goals and values, understand the demands of college, manage time pressures, and master test skills as well as public speaking anxieties. The use of active participatory methods such as the WRIT writing program, as opposed to only possible learning, assists the students in developing the motivation and interest necessary for them to achieve positive outcomes in college.

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